

CAG mulls action board

By Roger Morris, Western News Publisher

Lincoln County Commissioners presented a proposal Thursday night to the Citizens Advisory Group that would create a 9-member board to pursue specific goals offering potential solutions for the asbestos contamination from a former vermiculite mine in the area.

Commissioners researched the creation of the board on request of CAG members, who said the board would be able to complete work that the existing citizen's committee can't, such as hire an attorney.

CAG members talked Thursday of the need for an ordinance to state the goals of the community in terms of the clean-up of contaminated areas, the need for continuing monitoring, the need for a medical trust to insure future health screenings and coverage of medical costs for the presently diagnosed and those diagnosed in the future with asbestos-related diseases. The board would also pursue the continuing need for medical research, the location of research facilities in the community and an examination of the economic impacts of the asbestos contamination on the area.

The duties of the board would be to serve as advisors to the county commissioners, according to the proposal. It would have no independent authority and no authority to commit funds of the county without approval of the county commission.

"This is so large that I can't envision how a team of attorneys could represent what this community wants unless the community is involved," said County Commissioner Rita Windom. "I think we've lost sight of what this is about. We have a need for structure and research, not an ordinance."

Commissioner John Konzen said the asbestos is a nuisance and needs to be abated. "We need to move cautiously and look at it carefully."

Kalispell attorney Roger Sullivan, who represents numerous victims in civil suits against W.R. Grace, owner of the old mine, urged caution, sharing concern that an ordinance not pre-empt an individual's right to sue Grace. He reminded committee members that well-meaning legislation was proposed at the state and federal levels involving the Libby asbestos victims and each time the proposals would have limited their rights to recover legal damages and assistance for medical care.

"The whole intent of the 'Unite and Solve' plan is to eliminate the dichotomy of public and private damage," Sullivan said.

Gayla Benefield, victims advocate who sued Grace for the death of her mother, presented the "Unite and Solve" plan earlier this summer. It proposed that the community seek resolution from Grace, perhaps one large payment, to clean up local contamination and the associated health problems.

Instead, CAG approved four goals, which will be addressed by the proposed 9-member group. Those goals are to clean up all contamination and put in place long-term monitoring; create a system of medical monitoring, care and research; establish compensation for victims now and in the future, and restore the business vitality and reputation of Libby as a healthy community.

"We have a small window of opportunity to get this done," said Lerah Parker. "I don't want to see any part of this community say, 'Let's hurry up and get our money and the hell with everyone else.'"

Norita Skramstad, who is suffering from asbestos-related illness along with her husband

Les, expressed concerns with the group failing to take action quickly.

"It's taken us 10 months to get everyone to accept there is something wrong, to convince people of this town that we have a problem," she said. "Is it going to take another 10 months to agree on something?"

Dr. Brad Black, county health officer, complimented the commissioners on taking a leadership role. He said the creation of the 9-member board could help the community realize the goals adopted by CAG.

Paul Peronard, the EPA's on-site coordinator, said the CAG was formed as a community advisory to the federal agency. The group cannot serve as an advisory group to the EPA and hire attorneys to write ordinances or contemplate suing W.R. Grace.

Windom suggested the CAG members review the county proposal and discuss it with community members. "I want to make it perfectly clear, if you don't like it in any way our feelings won't be hurt," she said.

The first available date for the commissioners to discuss creation of the board during their regularly scheduled meetings would be Oct. 4, Windom said.